

# **GORBACHEV MEETS WITH LITHUANIAN; 'BIG STEP' IS CITED**



Associated Press

Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene in Moscow yesterday.

# OFFER TO NEGOTIATE

## Encounter Could Lead to Talks Cutting Tension Over Sovereignty

By **BILL KELLER**

Special to The New York Times

MOSCOW, May 17 — President Mikhail S. Gorbachev met with the Prime Minister of Lithuania in the Kremlin tonight and agreed to begin talks with the breakaway republic if the Lithuanian Parliament suspends its declaration of independence.

The official, Kazimiera Prunskiene, said tonight that the meeting, the first face-to-face encounter between Mr. Gorbachev and a leader of the Baltic republic, was a significant move toward negotiations that could lower the tension surrounding Lithuania's claim of sovereignty, made on March 11, and possibly end the limited economic blockade that Moscow has imposed in retribution.

Both the Lithuanian Prime Minister and the Soviet press agency Tass, reporting on the meeting tonight, said a serious hurdle remained in the way of beginning talks.

### Status of the Argument

Lithuania has offered to suspend the application of its independence proclamation, including laws repealing the Soviet military draft and laying claim to national property, but the republic has previously insisted that suspending the act itself might jeopardize its status as an equal partner in talks with Moscow.

Mrs. Prunskiene indicated that this difference should not be insurmountable. She said she would offer a version of a new compromise that might be considered by the Lithuanian Parliament as early as Saturday.

She emphasized that she had told Mr. Gorbachev that independence itself was not negotiable, and said he did not dispute the point.

"He said the fact that we met, that we discussed the issues, that we made progress from our previous positions — this was a big step forward," Mrs. Prunskiene said.

### Freer Hand for U.S. Talks

The meeting, which lasted an hour and 40 minutes, also appeared likely to ease the threat that the Lithuania conflict could overshadow Mr. Gorbachev's meeting with President Bush in Washington, beginning May 30.

Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d, reached tonight in Moscow, said that from what he had heard of the Kremlin meeting, "it would be a very

Continued on Page A6, Column 1

encouraging step."

Mr. Baker is scheduled to see Mrs. Prunskiene on Friday after a meeting with Mr. Gorbachev, a session that tonight promised to be a bit more relaxed.

"One of the things we have wanted to see throughout this was the two sides talking face to face," said a senior American official who is here with Mr. Baker. "Here, you have them not only talking face to face, but at a high level."

The official added: "We're pleased. You don't want to get carried away with it, either. But it's a real positive step in the right direction."

The Lithuanian offer and Mrs. Prunskiene's mission to Moscow were timed to catch Mr. Gorbachev at a moment when he would be eager for progress toward a settlement. Unless Moscow eases its embargo on fuel and other supplies, Lithuania is expected to exhaust its oil supplies around the time of the Washington meeting.

Mrs. Prunskiene had no assurance she would be welcomed in Moscow when she arrived this afternoon, bearing a compromise offer approved by the Lithuanian Parliament in a closed session on Wednesday.

But soon after her arrival, she said, Mr. Gorbachev telephoned and invited her to meet there this evening. They were joined by the Soviet Prime Minister, Nikolai I. Ryzhkov.

Mrs. Prunskiene said she got no firm commitment that Moscow would lift the economic sanctions that have caused an estimated 30,000 workers in Lithuania to be sent home from fuel-starved factories.

But she said the issue was discussed, and she left with an understanding that "there will be an appropriate decision" if the Soviet leadership is satisfied by the Lithuanian Parliament's next move.

#### Paris-Bonn Blueprint

The offer that Mrs. Prunskiene brought to Moscow closely resembled a compromise suggested last month by President François Mitterrand of France and Chancellor Helmut Kohl of West Germany. They proposed that Lithuania's sovereignty be accepted, but that the republic suspend any actions flowing from the decision as a basis for opening talks.

The meeting with Mr. Gorbachev was a significant step forward for several reasons.

First, the Soviet President has forsaken his earlier insistence that he would not meet with Lithuanian leaders until they had agreed to abide by Soviet law.

Second, it was the most explicit statement to date of the Kremlin's position, which has at times seemed deliberately ambiguous — at one point praising the Mitterrand-Kohl proposal, at other points insisting that Lithuania retreat all the way back to March 10, the day before it voted on independence.

Tass confirmed tonight that if the declaration was not repealed but suspended, it would be sufficient.

Third, Mrs. Prunskiene got a clear



# Gorbachev Meets Lithuanian and Agrees to Talks With a Condition

Continued From Page A1

and direct promise that if Lithuania agreed to those terms, this would lead to the long-sought talks.

Suspending the independence act, Tass said, "will immediately pave the way for the discussion of issues that worry peoples inhabiting Lithuania and that give rise to grave concern of Soviet republics, Soviet, and world opinion."

This promise, along with whatever message she takes home from her meeting with Mr. Baker on Friday, may be enough to ease suspicions on the Lithuanian side.

## Effect on Neighbors

Lithuania's situation is likely to affect the two other Baltic republics, Estonia and Latvia. After Lithuania's declaration of independence, announced as a clean break with Moscow, Estonia said on March 30 that it would make a gradual withdrawal from the Soviet Union. On May 4, Latvia declared independence. In a move seem-

ingly intended to reduce the possibilities for confrontation with Moscow, it established an open-ended transition period to independence, during which most Soviet laws would apply.

Mr. Gorbachev has insisted that any move to leave the Soviet Union must follow the procedures spelled out in a new Soviet law. These procedures include approval of independence by the republic's residents in a referendum, a transition period up to five years, and final approval by the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies.

But Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have said that they were illegally incorporated into the Soviet Union and that therefore they will not submit to such laws. In 1940, Stalin annexed the three republics under a secret protocol to a pact with Hitler.

Mrs. Prunskiene, now a seasoned diplomat after her missions to the White House, Canada and European capitals, appeared buoyed by the Kremlin reception.

"Now we know to what the extent the other side has moved ahead, that there has been major progress, and what are the sticking points on the main issues," she told reporters tonight at the Lithuanian mission in Moscow. "We can say quite clearly that the desire and intentions to begin a discussion on the entire range of issues, within a framework of interests on both sides, have been expressed."

Mrs. Prunskiene said that while the Soviet leaders seemed eager to end the stalemate, they were far from enthusiastic about the idea of Lithuania actually getting its freedom from the Soviet Union.

"Do they want or welcome the independence of Lithuania?" she asked rhetorically. "I not only doubt this, but I am sure they have no such desire. I confirmed once again today that they have trouble with this kind of decision, when a people independently decides an issue without the involvement of the Kremlin."